

Week Six: Social Manners

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RESPECT AND FAVOUR THE ELDERLY

[1] Recognize the status of the elderly and give them due respect. When walking with them, walk slightly behind, to their right. Let them enter and exit first. If you meet them, greet them properly and respectfully. If you discuss something with them, let them speak first, and listen to them attentively and graciously. If the conversation involves debate, you should remain polite, calm, and kind-hearted and you should lower your voice. Never forget to remain respectful.

[2] Imam Bukhari and Muslim reported that Abdullah bin Sahl made a trip with Mahisa bin Masoud in Zayed to Khaibar. When they were to about to return, Mahisa found Abdullah had been murdered. He went to the Prophet with his older brother, Howaisa and the victim's brother, Abdul Rahman bin Sahl. Mahisa who witnessed the incident started to talk, but the Prophet said, 'the elder, the elder.' At that, Howaisa spoke and then Mahisa.

[3] Another story emphasizes this behaviour further. When he was young, Abdullah bin Omar was at a gathering of the Prophet and his senior companions like Abu Bakr and his father.

The Prophet asked his companions, 'Tell what is the tree that does not shed its leaves and which is like the Muslim.' The companions started suggesting names of desert trees.

Abdullah bin Omar thought it was the date-palm. Since he was the youngest, and seeing Abu Bakr and Omar silent, he shied away and said nothing. The Prophet told his companions: 'It is the palm tree'. Later, Abdullah told his father that he knew the right answer but shied away. Omar said to his son 'For you to have said it right then, would have been worth a lot to me.'

[4] Imam Ahmad, Al-Hakim and Al-Tabarani reported that 'Ubada bin Al-Samit stated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: 'Whoever does not respect our elders is not one of us.'

Another version reported: 'Whoever does not respect our elders, is not compassionate to our youth, and does not give our scholars due honour, he is not one of us.'

[5] This should not be taken to belittle the youth or look down on them.

Imam Bukhari reported that Ibn Abbas narrated that Omar was allowing him to attend his court with seniors who attended Badr. Some of them felt uneasy and asked, 'Why are you permitting him to attend when he is as young as our children?' Omar replied, 'He is [knowledgeable] as you well know.' Another version elaborates that Omar asked the seniors to explain Sura Al-Fatiha and only Abdullah in Abbas explained it correctly. Ibn Abbas said, 'I thought he asked the question just to demonstrate my knowledge to them.'

THE ELDERLY ARE TO LEAD PRAYERS

[1] The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) taught the youth the manners of companionship and the custom of giving precedence to elders.

[2] Al-Bukhari and Muslim reported that the honoured companion Malik bin Al-Hwairith (RA) said: 'I was with a youth group that visited the Messenger of Allah in Madina for twenty nights. The Messenger of Allah was very kind and compassionate. He sensed that we might have missed our families back home and he asked us about whom we had left behind. When we informed him, he said: 'Go back to your families, live with them, teach them Islam and tell them of the good deeds. At the times of prayer, let one of you call the Azan, and have your eldest lead the prayer.' '

The Prophet (PBUH) specified in this particular case that the eldest should lead the prayers since they were equal in their knowledge and learning. Being older in such a case merits leading the prayers. If a person is more knowledgeable, then he should lead the prayer since knowledge is an honor higher than age as could be seen in the Hadiths on this subject.

If the prayers were offered at a house, the host is entitled to lead it. Out of respect, he may request a person who is more knowledgeable, older or more prominent. If the guest declines, the host should not hesitate to lead the prayers. Imam Ahmad reported in his Musnad that Abdullah ibn Masoud visited Abu Musa Al-Ashari. When it was time to pray, Abu Musa asked Ibn Masoud, 'Please lead the prayers since you are older and have more knowledge.' Ibn Masoud said, 'No, you lead the prayer. This is your house and praying area. You should lead the prayer.' Abu Musa did lead the prayer then.

WALKING WITH THE ELDERLY

[1] 'Ali bin Mubarak Al-Karkhi (-487H), who studied under Imam, Abi Y'ala Al-Hanbali, himself a jurist and judge and the chief Shaikh of the Hanbali School of Law: 'One day, Judge Abu 'Yala said to me, while walking with him: 'If you walked with someone you honour, where would you walk?' I said: 'I do not know.' He said, 'Walk to his right. Place him at the position of Imam in the prayer. Leave his left side clear in case he needs to spit or to get rid of dirt.'

[2] An interesting story in this regard happened among three Muslim scholars. They were walking along together when they came to a very narrow passageway, and each wanted the other to go ahead. Ibn Suraih said, 'A narrow street brings ill manners.' Ibn Dawood responded, 'Though it points out status.' Naftawih said, 'When friendship prevails, formalities disappear.'

The story does not tell who went ahead of the others, but it is likely that it was Ahmad bin Suriah since he was a judge and a prominent Imam at the time and ranked above his two companions. He may have said 'A narrow street rings ill manners' apologizing out of politeness for going ahead. He could not have said it if any of the two moved ahead since that would have been impolite. There is a possibility that Naftawih went ahead since his words could be an apology for doing that since he is the least ranked.

THE ELDERLY ARE TO BE SERVED FIRST

[1] Give precedence to the elderly or to dignitaries, ahead of anyone else. After that, you may proceed with those on their right if you want to follow the practice of the Prophet (PBUH).

[2] Imam Muslim reported in his Sahih in the Chapter on the Manners and Rules of Eating and Drinking, that Huzaifa bin Al-Yaman (RA) said: 'Whenever we were invited to a meal with the Messenger of Allah (PBUH), we would not reach the food with our hands before he reached for it.'

[3] Imam Al-Nawawi, in his book Riyad Al- Salihîn, cited a large collection of Hadith and devoted a whole chapter to the subject of 'Respecting Scholars, the Elderly and the Dignitaries. Giving them Precedence and the Best Seat. Acknowledging their Preminence.'

[4] Allah said in the Quran: 'Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who possess understanding that receive admonition.'

[5] Imam Muslim reported that 'Uqba bin 'Amr Al-Badri Al-Ansari (RA) stated that the Prophet (PBUH) said: 'Those who are best at reciting the Quran should lead a group's prayer. If they are equal, then those most versed in the Sunna should lead; if they are equal, then a person who migrated first [from Makka to Madina] should lead; if they had migrated at the same time, then an elder should lead.'

[6] Imam Muslim reported that Ibn Mas'od said that the Prophet (PBUH) said: 'Let your wise and mature pray immediately behind me, then those who trail behind them, and then those who trail behind them.'

[7] Imam Al-Bukhari reported that Jabir bin Abdullah (RA) said: 'After the battle of Uhud, the Prophet (PBUH) buried two martyrs in one grave. He asked, 'which one memorized more of the Quran?' Upon being told which it was, he laid him first facing Qibla.'

[8] Muslim reported that Abdullāh bin Omar (RA) stated that the Prophet (PBUH) said: 'I dreamt I was brushing my teeth with Sewak when two men approached me. I handed the Sewak to the younger but was instructed to hand it to the older. Accordingly, I handed it to the older.'

[9] Imam Abu Dawood reported as a fair Hadith that Abu Mûsa Al-Ash'ari (RA) stated that the Prophet (PBUH) said: 'Part of paying homage to Allah is to respect an elder whose hair has turned gray, or a [regular] reader of the Quran, or a just ruler.'

[10] This desired behaviour towards elders is so important that the Prophet made it a part of respecting and venerating Allah. To ignore it is a gross misbehaviour. At its forefront comes respect and reverence of the just ruler.

[11] Abu Dawood and Al-Hakim reported as an authentic Hadith that Maimūn bin Abi Shabīb recounted that a beggar stopped the Prophet's wife Aisha (RA) and she gave him a piece of dry bread. At another time, a properly-dressed, well-groomed man asked her for food. She let him sit and offered him a meal. When asked about that, she replied that the Prophet (PBUH) said: 'Treat people according to their status.'

[12] Imam Al-Nawawi concluded this chapter by citing a Hadith as reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim in which Samura bin Jundub (RA) said: 'Though I was a young child at the time of the Prophet, I used to listen to what he said and memorize it. Nothing prevents me from narrating my knowledge except the presence of men older than me.'

[13] In conclusion, the Sunnah is to start according to the following order of merits: age, knowledge, social status, lineage, veterans of Jihad, generosity or similar virtues. Further, the Sunnah of hospitality, is to start with the most prominent, then to move to those on the right in order to harmonize the custom of starting on the right with the custom of starting with people of virtue.

[14] Some people who misunderstand the real meaning of some texts of the Sunnah claim that the Sunnah is to start with those on your right whoever they are. They base this on Hadiths that stress starting from the right. But this is only true when the group is in all ways equal in character, status or age. However, if one of them is distinguished with a merit such as old age, then the Sunnah is to start with this person.

[15] In his book *Al-Bayan wa Tahsīl* Imam Ibn Rushd said: 'As a rule, if the status of those present is equal, one should start on the right, as with every desirable act. However, if a scholar, an honourable person or an elder is present, the Sunnah is to start with such a person and then move to his or her right in a counter clockwise fashion. The Messenger of Allah was offered milk mixed with water while a Bedouin was sitting on his right, and to his left, was sitting Abu Bakr. The Prophet drank some and handed it over to the Bedouin saying, 'From the right, then to the right.'

[16] Do not proceed to the left in an anti-clockwise fashion, even if the person to the left is of a higher status, unless those on the right agree to pass their turn.

[17] The Messenger (PBUH) was sitting with elders on his left and a young man on his right. He was brought a drink. After drinking, he asked the young man: 'Would you give me the permission to pass it to those?

The boy answered: 'By Allah no. I would not favour anyone with my share of your drink.' The Prophet willingly put the drink in the child hand indicating that it is his right.

[18] The Indian scholar, Al-Mubarkfuri, in his treatise on explaining Jami` Al-Tirmizi elaborated on this. When commenting on the Hadith, 'the server should be the last one to drink,' Al-Mubarkfuri said, 'This indicates that the server should delay his drink until all the guests are

served. The same applies when fruits are being served. The most notable should be served first, and then those of the right until everyone is served.'

[19] Al-Minawi in his explanation of Sharh Al-Shamail commented on the previous Hadith of Ibn Abbas: 'This implies that the Sunna is to continue serving drinks and food with those on the right of the most noble person even if that person happened to be less important than the person on the left.'

[20] A Hadith in Sahih Muslim reinforces this rule of serving the elder or the most noble first, and then those on his right. Abdullah bin Bosur said, 'The Prophet visited my father and we served him with food made of dates and butter. Then he was brought dates, and he ate it and threw the pit using his middle and forefingers. Then he was brought a drink from which he drank and passed it to his right.'

The words 'he was brought a drink' clearly indicates that he was served first before those on his right since he was the noblest person present, and that then he passed it to those on his right. It indicates that they started with the Prophet out of respect and not because he asked for a drink. The preceding words 'he was brought dates' reinforces this understanding. It is very unlikely that the Prophet, while a guest, will ask his host for food and then for drink. It could be argued that this is a possibility. Indeed, it is a hypothetical possibility that lacks evidence or probability.

[21] An important aspect of proper manners is that some people extend help and hospitality to strangers out of faith and pure humanity. If it becomes known that the person needing help has additional virtues such as being a scholar or notable person, they will go an extra step in their generosity and providing help. This is undoubtedly evidence of right instinct and faith which motivated such gestures.

[22] Therefore, the general rule is to start from the right if those present are equal in merit. However, if there is a person who is well-known for a respectable trait, then start with that person. If we were to follow the alleged rule that hosts ought to start with the person who happened to be on their right, then we could start with a young child, a servant, a driver, or a guard, at the expense of more prominent guests such as a dignitary, a revered scholar, a notable, a parent, a grandparent, or an uncle. Would it be acceptable by the Shari'a and its refined manners to forsake honouring and starting with persons of character, in favour of starting with a child, a servant, a driver and then proceed to persons of higher status? Also, it is possible that the ten persons or more are sitting on the right side before the most honourable person. To reach them at the end does not befit their status and may offend them. Islamic manners definitely do not accept this irregular conduct.

[23] However, if someone asks for a drink, they have the right to the request before anybody else regardless of age or status, and the round should proceed with those on their right. If this person notices someone older or of higher status showing desire for the drink, he, or she may willingly give up his, or her right in favour of that person. When preferring others to yourself,

you have practiced the Islamic manner of unselfishness, and you will achieve great virtue, and honour and gain great rewards.

[24] To respect, obey and give precedence to the elderly is an old and established Arab custom.

[25] Advice of Qais bin Asem AL-Tamimi, a great companion.